

Message Text

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PAGE 01 STOCKH 03756 061826Z
ACTION EUR-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1591
INFO AMEMBASSY PANAMA

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINS, CVIS, SW, PN
SUBJ: DEATH OF PANAMANIAN CITIZEN LEOPOLDO ARAGON

1. THOSE OF US WHO LIVED THROUGH THE SELF-DESTRUCTION OF
LEOPOLDO ARAGON IN FRONT OF OUR EMBASSY ARE STILL STUNNED.
OUR FEELING IS MOSTLY PITY FOR A FELLOW HUMAN BEING, TOGETHER
WITH UNFADING HORROR AT THE MANNER OF HIS DEATH. TO THE EXTENT
ONE CAN THINK BEYOND COMPASSION AT SUCH A TIME, SEVERAL THOUGHTS
DO ARISE:

2. FIRST, IT IS HARD TO COMPREHEND--ESPECIALLY IN THIS DETACHED
AND CALM NORTHLAND--THAT A MAN WOULD BURN HIMSELF TO DEATH TO
OPPOSE A NEW PANAMA CANAL TREATY. IN HIS HORRIBLE CONDITION,
DURING THOSE ETERNAL MINUTES BEFORE THE AMBULANCE CAME, ARAGON
LIFTED HIS BLACKENED HEAD SEVERAL TIMES TO SAY IN ENGLISH,
"THEY MUST NOT SIGN". SUCH DEPTH OF PASSION OVER A POLITICAL
ISSUE IS ASTONISHING: HOW MUCH IT REVEALS AN UNBALANCE MIND
WE OF COURSE CANNOT JUDGE. BUT IN THE AMERICAN DEBATE OVER
THE TREATY, AND OVER WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IF AGREEMENT IS NOT
REACHED, SURELY THIS POOR PANAMANIAN'S DYING TESTIMONY
SHOULD ALSO BE BORNE IN MIND. HE WAS PERHAPS TELLING US WHAT
CAN HAPPEN IF REASON DOES NOT PREVAIL.

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PAGE 02 STOCKH 03756 061826Z

3. SECOND, WE DO NOT KNOW IF PUBLIC CONTROVERSY MIGHT ARISE
OVER THE REFUSAL OF A US VISA, BUT ARAGON'S SELF-IMMOLATION
SHOULD PROVE THAT IT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN WISE TO ADMIT HIM.
WE BELIEVE OUR CONSULAR OFFICERS TREATED ARAGON WITH AS MUCH
UNDERSTANDING AS POSSIBLE. SUCH EVIDENCE AS WE HAVE SHOWS
THAT HE WAS TILTING AGAINST REALITY: THE VISA REFUSAL WAS ONLY

ANOTHER SIGN THAT THE WORLD WAS NOT HEEDING HIM, AND THERE IS PROBABLY NO WAY HE WOULD HAVE BEEN SATISFIED BY US ACTIONS.

4. THIS LEADS TO THE VEXING QUESTION OF THE MORAL STANDARDS OF THE PRESS IN DEALING WITH THIS SICK MAN. WE ARE NOT TALKING OFFICIALLY TO SWEDES ABOUT THIS, SINCE IT IS NOT FOR THE EMBASSY TO SIT IN JUDGEMENT. SWEDES THEMSELVES ARE TALKING ABOUT IT, THOUGH, FOR THE NIGHTMARISH PHOTOGRAPHS--INCLUDING ONE OF ARAGON LIGHTING THE FUEL--ARE REMINDERS THAT THE PRESS WAS FOREWARNED. ARAGON TOLD THOSE HE SPOKE WITH AT SWEDISH RADIO (A BLOCK AWAY FROM US) WHAT HE WAS ABOUT TO DO: ONE PHONE CALL TO THE POLICE OR TO OUR EMBASSY WOULD PROBABLY HAVE ENABLED PREVENTION OF THE SUICIDE--AND ARAGON COULD STILL HAVE HAD SOME OF THE PUBLICITY HE SOUGHT. INDEED, WHILE WE CANNOT KNOW, IT SEEMS POSSIBLE THAT HIS STOPPING BY SWEDISH RADIO WAS NOT MERELY A SEEKING OF PUBLICITY, BUT A SICK MAN'S WAY--EVEN IN SAYING "I'LL KILL YOU IF YOU TRY TO STOP ME"--OF ASKING TO BE STOPPED. WE CANNOT KNOW HOW MUCH THE JOURNALISTS PUT ARAGON'S GESTURE BEFORE HIS LIFE, BUT THE THOUGHT IS DISTURBING.

5. THERE IS A SECURITY ASPECT TO THIS TOO. WHETHER UNBALANCED OR NOT, ARAGON PLANNED HIS DEED CAREFULLY AND DID IT EFFECTIVELY. IF HE HAD DECIDED TO TURN TO TERRORISM INSTEAD OF SUICIDE, HE WOULD HAVE BEEN HARD TO STOP. THE PRIVATE SWEDISH-PROVIDED GUARDS WERE NOT IMPRESSIVE (ALTHOUGH WE ARE WELL AWARE IN OUR OWN SECURITY PLANNING THAT THEY ARE OUT THERE MAINLY FOR LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 STOCKH 03756 061826Z

SHOW AND AS TRIP-WIRES). OUR OWN MARINES WERE EXTREMELY IMPRESSIVE AND REASSURING (SEE BELOW). STILL, SINCE MANY OF OUR STAFF WITNESSED THE BLOWING UP OF THE GERMAN EMBASSY NEXT DOOR BY TERRORISTS ONLY TWO YEARS AGO, THEY DO NOT NEED MUCH REMINDING OF WHAT A MENTALITY LIKE ARAGON'S, WITHOUT RATIONAL LIMITS, IS CAPABLE OF. THIS EVENT WAS AN EFFECTIVE REMINDER OF THE DANGERS AROUND US.

6. THE SWEDISH AUTHORITIES WERE SYMPATHETIC AND HELPFUL--POLICE, MEDICAL PERSONNEL AND FOREIGN MINISTRY CONTACTS.

7. IF THE CHARGE MAY BE PERMITTED A PERSONAL WORD, THE ONLY GOOD IN THIS TRAGEDY WAS THE HIGHLY IMPRESSIVE PERFORMANCE OF THE EMBASSY STAFF, BOTH AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS A TEAM. THE MARINE DETACHMENT WAS ABSOLUTELY SUPERB, PROVING WHAT A FINE UNIT WE HAVE. SGT. BRICKLEY SOUNDED THE ALARM WITHOUT WASTING A SECOND; NCOIC MONTOURI TOOK CHARGE AND PERSONALLY PUT OUT THE FLAMES COVERING ARAGON'S BODY, PERFORMING WITH EXCEPTIONAL COURAGE AND PRESENCE OF MIND; AND SGT. J. JOHNSON AND SGT. INGEBRETSON RENDERED IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE TO THE NCOIC AND ALSO DESERVE COMMENDATION. SEVERAL OTHER EMPLOYEES ACTED IMPRESSIVELY, INCLUDING RECEPTIONIST JULIE NEWMAN,

WHO RAN OUT TO HELP, AND DRIVER AKE BLIST, WHO RODE IN THE
AMBULANCE WITH ARAGON. MANY EMBASSY OFFICERS ACTED QUICKLY
AND COMMENDABLY, INCLUDING PRESS OFFICER PHIL WOLCOTT, WHO
DEALT WITH THE PRESS OPENLY AND HELPFULLY (AND THUS HELPED
TO KEEP THE STORY FROM TAKING A MORE ANTI-US TURN, AS IT MIGHT
HAVE DONE); ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER BOB DEASON, WHO HANDLED
LIAISON WITH THE POLICE; POLITICAL COUNSELOR PAUL CANNEY, WHO
SAW TO NOTIFICATION AND PROMPT REPORTING; AND A NUMBER OF OTHERS.
IN SHORT, THE STAFF'S REACTION DURING THIS HARROWING EVENT
WAS A SOURCE OF COMFORT AND PRIDE.
PERRY

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